



# Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

### Fourth Sunday of Easter A



Good shepherd. Russian icon, 19 c. Niederland, private collection



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

### Prayer to the Good Shepherd

Faithful Shepherd,

You are not a hireling, who runs away at the sight of danger,  
but your fidelity was tested  
and proven on the wood of the Cross.

Accept the gift of our gratitude  
for your marvelous care.

Help us to hear and follow your voice.

Watchful Shepherd,

who protects the flock  
and searches tirelessly  
for those who wander from the fold,  
retrieve the lost and bring them home.  
Tend and heal their wounds.

Good Shepherd,

who lays down His Life for His sheep,  
nourish your people with the Bread of Life,  
that we may reflect your likeness  
and enjoy the spring of Living Water that never ends.

*Amen.*

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& Creed**  
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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Fourth Sunday of Easter each year centers its attention on Jesus, the Good Shepherd and his sheep, we the Church.
- ▶ We, the sheep of his flock are considered like a sacrament in the mind of the Church. Christ is present and active in the Church itself—thus we—the Church—function like a sacrament—a visible sign of Christ's presence.
- ▶ The sacraments of the Church remember and make present to us the life, mission, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. *Remembering that makes that which is remembered present* is called anamnesis.
- ▶ When we worship and remember sacred events we bring those events into the present so that we too are given access to the saving power of Christ today.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

## First Reading: Acts 2:14a, 36-41

- ▶ We are still caught in the drama of the Pentecost scene from last week's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles.
- ▶ Peter is calling on the Jews to put their faith in Christ.
- ▶ Peter proclaims the reign of God that is being inaugurated in their midst. The Christian mission is underway.
- ▶ Peter exercised the authority Jesus conferred upon him and professed the Christian kerygma, that is--**Jesus Christ was crucified, rose from the dead and ascended to his Father's throne as part of God's plan of salvation for the world.**
- ▶ Peter was exhorting the Jewish people to repent and believe in the Good News that was unfolding before them. How privileged they were to stand on the threshold of God's saving work! Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah—the one whom the prophets foretold.
- ▶ The repentance Peter was calling for entailed conversion and metanoia—a complete turning from their previous lives to embrace what God was doing in and through his Son, Jesus Christ.
- ▶ The people were demoralized by Jesus' crucifixion. Many abandoned him. Jesus could not have been the person they thought he was—God never would have allowed his Son to endure the utter shame and horror of the cross. He must have been a fraud. He could not have been the *One* for whom they had been waiting.
- ▶ This was the moment of decision. Would they accept Jesus as Lord and Messiah or not? Those who rejected Jesus were now at an impasse. They must decide. Is he God's agent of salvation as Peter claims or is he an imposter?
- ▶ Peter proceeds to teach the people about the importance of baptism.

- ▶ Baptism is the gateway to salvation; it incorporates the believer into Christ's life.
- ▶ Conversion, however, is a life-time enterprise. Baptized believers have the responsibility to conform their lives to Christ's life throughout the ongoing journey of life—to participate in his death and resurrection each and every day.
- ▶ Believers will be fortified to live the Christian life through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ Christ redeemed us, extended his mercy and offered forgiveness for our sinfulness. We in turn are to extend his mercy and forgiveness to others.
- ▶ Baptism calls all believers to go out and bring the Good News to all the world—where we live, work, play and pray.
- ▶ Baptized Christians are baptized into Christ's priestly, royal and prophetic ministry. In other words, we are baptized priest, prophet and king. We are baptized priest to serve God's people, prophet to proclaim God's word by the witness of our lives—our example, our words and our actions. We are baptized king to lead people to Christ.
- ▶ Baptism calls us to welcome everyone in the name of Christ—his is a universal mission.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What are the implications for your life in this reading?
- ▶ We could ask ourselves the same question—do we accept Jesus as Lord and Messiah in our own lives? What evidence is there in your life that you have accepted him as your Lord?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that conversion is a life-time enterprise? What are the implications for your life?
- ▶ In what way have the Christians you know lived as priest, prophet and king?
- ▶ What does it mean to you to live as a priest a prophet or a king? In what way are you presently living out those roles?

### Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:20b-25

- ▶ Today's reading is a reminder to believers to patiently endure the trials of the present.
- ▶ Peter insists that Christians must look to Christ as a model of patient endurance. He hearkens back to suffering servant hymn found in the book of Isaiah.
- ▶ Jesus saved us by patiently enduring the horror of the cross. He shed his blood for the salvation of the world. By his stripes we are healed and set free. His suffering



is the source of our redemption. Through the wounds of the cross we are empowered to imitate his self-sacrifice.

- ▶ Today's reading also echoes forms of leadership of the time. The Greek word *episcopos* (guardian or overseer) was eventually juxtaposed as a reference for the leader of the community.
- ▶ The word Shepherd, overseer and guardian were commonly used to describe Christ's divine mission.
- ▶ Christ, the *episcopos* was leading his flock and is the model for all leaders who would follow him and similarly lead God's flock.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ In what way is this reading a comforting or consoling word?
- ▶ What is the primary theme of this reading and what does it have to do with our everyday lives?
- ▶ What does this reading suggest to us about the power of patient endurance? Have you ever patiently endured an experience of suffering or a specific trial in your life? What did you learn from the experience?

## Gospel: John 10:1-10

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

## Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Jesus is the gate and the shepherd in the Gospel parables.
- ▶ The Good Shepherd parables serve as a polemic that challenges the religious elite of Jesus' day. Will they accept Jesus as Shepherd or not?
- ▶ There is no proof for his authenticity, but true believers should be able to recognize God in his teaching, preaching and very persona.
- ▶ The parables not only serve as a challenge to religious leaders of Jesus' day but also serve the same function no matter what century.
- ▶ In a previous chapter Jesus chastised the Pharisees for their blindness. This is still very fresh in the minds of readers. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who shines forth as a perfect example of what it means to be a true and authentic leader

of the people. A true leader loves his flock and cares for them. Jesus stood in contrast to the self-serving Pharisees.

- ▶ The term *shepherd* was synonymous with *pastor of the people* at the time John wrote this Gospel. John used the term only in relation to Jesus.
- ▶ Jesus is the shepherd to follow, emulate, trust and look up to. All who experience his ministry know his identity—he truly is the Son of God.
- ▶ In order to fully appreciate the role of shepherd it is important to consider the pasture motif of first century Palestine.
- ▶ Sheep were kept in a common enclosure. Every day the various shepherds would converge on the enclosure to gather their own sheep and take them into the desert for the day's grazing. At the end of each day all the various herds would be gathered into a common enclosure to protect them from wolves, thieves and marauders.
- ▶ Each day one shepherd would be chosen to guard the entrance/gate to the enclosure in order to protect the entire flock.
- ▶ The one shepherd would guard the gate by placing his body in front of it. He would protect the sheep with his life if called upon to do so. In order to get to the flock a thief would first have to go through the shepherd.
- ▶ Each morning the various shepherds would return from their tents and converge on the enclosure calling out the names of their sheep as they did so. The sight was amazing to behold. The sheep recognized their master's voice and ran to him. What could have been mass hysteria and chaos was instead quite orderly. Each sheep knew where it was going and wasted no time getting there.
- ▶ Readers and hearers of these parables must consider the pastoral reality of the setting when interpreting them.
- ▶ The point of the parables is multifaceted. Jesus is obviously the shepherd who can be counted on to guard the sheep of the enclosure. Jesus will say who enters and who is kept out. Jesus will determine who is called to authentic pastoral ministry. He will call forth the pastors of the people. We already know that Peter is one of his choices.
- ▶ The Pharisees do not fare well in the parables. If they refuse to accept Jesus and try to enter some other way they will be branded as thieves.
- ▶ Entrance to and exit from the gathered enclosure is only through Jesus—the gate.
- ▶ *Life* and *gate* are also synonymous. Those who enter through it will be given life.
- ▶ Jesus is the Good Shepherd whose flock intimately recognizes his voice. They come running when he calls them. They belong to Jesus.
- ▶ The Pharisees are mere hirelings who come to shear the sheep's wool and yet care nothing for the animal. Jesus loves his sheep. He is in intimate relationship with them—so much so that he is willing to sacrifice his life for their welfare.
- ▶ Baptism brings us into intimate communion with the Good Shepherd who also knows us, his flock, each by our individual name.
- ▶ The Good Shepherd motif teaches us what it means to be a true leader. A

leader is one who sacrifices himself or herself for the sake of those he or she leads.

- ▶ It behooves a great leader to learn the names of those in his or her flock and be willing to guard the entrance to the kingdom with his or her very life. Such is the price every true shepherd pays for the sake of his flock.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See the appendix for an example.

- ▶ What spoke to you the most in today's Gospel?
  - ▶ What are the implications of today's Gospel?
  - ▶ Do you know any great leaders? What makes them great in your estimation?
  - ▶ What qualities of leadership does Jesus illustrate in the Good Shepherd parables?
  - ▶ In what way have you ever acted like Jesus the Good Shepherd in your own life?
  - ▶ Place yourself in the enclosure, protected by the Great Shepherd. Describe the feelings. In what way if any would you live your life differently as a result of being cared for by the Good Shepherd? How does having such a protector shape the way you live your life?
  - ▶ How does it make you feel when someone remembers your name? How does it make you feel when they should have remembered your name but did not?
  - ▶ Have you ever had the experience of knowing that Jesus loves you so much that he calls you by your name? What does that mean to you? How are you called to live differently as a result?
  - ▶ In what way, if any, has Jesus ever stood guard over the door to your enclosure (heart)? When have you ever felt protected by God's own hand?
- 
- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
  - ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

## Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

## APPENDIX

We are truly blessed when we are privileged to know a leader or pastor who exemplifies the Good Shepherd in today's Gospel. I am blessed to have such a pastor. I offer thanks to God everyday for the way he brings Christ to us and is an example of self-sacrificing love for each and every one of us.

No matter what concern that is brought to him; no matter the agenda behind it, every person gets a fair hearing before this shepherd. There is absolutely no guile in his heart. He respects each member of his flock and each member stands equally before him. Each person who encounters him feels heard and their human dignity is always uplifted after an encounter with him.

What I have learned about forgiveness over the years I learned from my twenty years with him. He teaches the truth yet listens compassionately when others struggle with it. He gently leads them toward it. He does not push. He gently, yet persuasively invites.

He truly is Christ's representative. It is no wonder the apostles were mesmerized by their Great Shepherd. I could follow mine to the end of my days and he is only a mere reflection of the long awaited Messiah. I feel truly blessed to have such a long association with this amazing man who stands *in persona Christi*!

He invites me to be a better disciple. He, in fact, empowers it!





# Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Holy Orders  
Sacraments  
Evangelization  
Cross and Paschal Mystery  
Baptism

Confirmation  
Symbols of Bread and Wine  
Church and Ecclesiology  
Church Structure  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

## HOLY ORDERS

The author of 1 Peter addresses leadership in the emerging Christian church. The new gentile converts were like sheep in need of a shepherd to lead and guide them. It was believed that the leader of the community—the local *episcopos*, Christ the Good Shepherd was leading his people—his flock of believers. On this Sunday in which we celebrate Jesus the Good Shepherd, it is fitting we address what the church teaches about the sacrament of Holy Orders.

## SACRAMENTS

Sacraments continue Christ's saving mission in our day and our time. Christ the Good Shepherd is manifested to us in the sacraments of the Church. We are given access to his ministry through the sacraments. The Church teaches that the sacraments of the Church manifest Christ's own Paschal Mystery—his passion, death and resurrection. We remember what Christ did and in the process the Paschal Mystery is made present to us. We are given access to his healing, reconciling and salvific mission through the sacraments. It is thus most appropriate that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about sacraments—the celebrations/rituals that bring the healing, reconciling, saving mission of Christ into our midst—that make present Christ's life, passion, death, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Thus today our doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about SACRAMENTS.

## EVANGELIZATION

Peter preaches before the crowds in Jerusalem. He preaches the Christian kerygma. He told the people that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah foretold by the prophets. Peter is an icon for us today of what it means to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Baptism requires that we live our role as priest to serve God's people, prophet to proclaim God's word through our words and actions and king to lead people to Christ. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on our Easter faith and what Jesus commanded us to do--go out and preach the Good News to all the nations. Today's doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about EVANGELIZATION.

## **CROSS AND PASCHAL MYSTERY**

1 Peter, the second reading today, reminds the people to be steadfast in the midst of suffering and persecution. Believers are to look to the cross as a model of their patient endurance. It is thus fitting that today we focus on the means of our salvation—the cross of Jesus Christ.

## **BAPTISM**

At the Easter Vigil the elect were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The liturgies of the Easter season make the sacraments of initiation an important focus for our doctrinal session. Thus it is fitting that our doctrinal session will focus on the SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM.

## **SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION**

At the Easter Vigil the elect were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The liturgies of the Easter season make the sacraments of initiation an important focus for our doctrinal session. The sacrament of confirmation anoints the person with God's Spirit and conforms their life intimately to Christ's life—thus strengthening them to fully participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ that was manifested par excellence at the Easter Vigil. Through this sacrament we are given the strength to profess faith in Christ. During the weeks of Easter we have a front row seat watching the early Church go out and spread the Christian faith when we hear the Acts of the Apostles proclaimed each week. Thus today it is fitting that we focus our attention on the SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION.

## **SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE**

Jesus the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Every Eucharistic liturgy represents the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary and his resurrection from the dead. At the Easter Vigil the elect were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The liturgies of the Easter season are an invitation to focus our attention on the sacraments of initiation. The sacrament of Eucharist fully incorporates the neophyte into the Eucharistic community. When we eat the Bread of Life and drink his Blood we share fully in his Paschal Mystery. The sacraments of initiation incorporate the neophyte into the Paschal Mystery of Christ—his life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the sending of the Spirit that was manifested par excellence in the Easter Vigil liturgy. Thus today it is fitting that we focus our attention on the sacramental SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE.

## **CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY**

Throughout the Easter season, Luke, the author of Acts and the Gospel of Luke charts the development of the emerging church—the fledgling communities. The church exists to establish the reign of God now as Christians await the coming of Christ in the age to

come. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY.

### CHURCH STRUCTURE

Throughout the Easter season, Luke, the author of Acts and the Gospel of Luke charts the development of the emerging church—the fledgling communities. The church exists to establish the reign of God now as Christians await the coming of Christ in the age to come. The church was unified in heart and purpose. They shared all things in common. They upheld the ideal Church as they worked to achieve that end. Ministry was needed in the community and a clear definition of roles. Those roles continue today. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about CHURCH STRUCTURE.

### EUCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.